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Abstract

In defence of the Canada Council's recent decision to consider 'appropriateness of voice and subject matter in future funding decisions', director Joyce Zemans has argued that 'we have a new need for authenticity.'1 In the context of post-colonial theory, the debate generated by this move seems a bit belated, and the obsession of a settler society for artistic authenticity rather suspect. That the settler cannot, by definition, achieve the authenticity of unequivocal cultural authenticity and connection to place which is often imagined to have characterized pre-colonial society is clear, and, perhaps, ultimately beside the point. The power of authenticity ultimately derives, not from being authentic, which precludes selfconsciousness and hence, the power-producing knowledge of one's own authenticity, but from being able to read, recognize and ultimately own the authenticity of the Other. I want to suggest that the politics of reading, writing and publishing when seen in these terms may be related to the politics of tourism- the ostensible (and perhaps authentic) subject of this paper.

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> At the entrance to a city's harbour, a statue depicting a loved story will entice more tourists than a street of wealthy merchants
>
> Janet Frame, *The Carpathians*

In defence of the Canada Council's recent decision to consider 'appropriateness of voice and subject matter in future funding decisions', director Joyce Zemans has argued that 'we have a new need for authenticity.'[1] In the context of post-colonial theory, the debate generated by this move seems a bit belated, and the obsession of a settler society for artistic authenticity rather suspect. That the settler cannot, by definition, achieve the authenticity of unequivocal cultural authenticity and connection to place which is often imagined to have characterized pre-colonial society is clear, and, perhaps, ultimately beside the point. The power of authenticity ultimately derives, not from being authentic, which precludes self-consciousness and hence, the power-producing knowledge of one's own authenticity, but from being able to read, recognize and ultimately own the authenticity of the Other. I want to suggest that the politics of reading, writing and publishing when seen in these terms may be related to the politics of tourism – the ostensible (and perhaps authentic) subject of this paper.

In a review of Dean MacCannell's *Tourism*, Georges Van Den Abeele notes that

> The tourist's quest for authenticity and his production of theory (in the largest possible sense of the imaginary construction of reality) parallel the social scientist's [and I would add here, the literary critic's] search for authentic social data and his own production of a theory to explain it.[2]

Janet Frame's latest novel *The Carpathians* explores both kinds of quests, focusing on the relationships engendered by the practices of writing and tourism, as they are played out between the US and New Zealand.

The Carpathians describes the experiences of Mattina Brecon, a wealthy American who spends two months in the small New Zealand town of Puamahara, getting to know its inhabitants. This is not the first such trip for Mattina; she has, in her own words 'made a career of being there and talking to *them* in all parts of the world.'[3] She travels both to enliven an unfulfilling marriage, and to acquire knowledge – aims which turn out to be not unrelated. Quite simply, as she sees it, her desire to travel can be attributed to:

> An urgency within her [which] demanded that she 'know' how the rest of the world lived, how they felt and behaved, what they said to one another, what they rejoiced in, despaired of, and dreamed about; and so whenever she travelled, she sought the company of the 'natives', listened to their stories, and often, recklessly, felt the satisfaction of giving cheques towards needs that could not recognise or be fed by money. (p. 19)

Mattina does not see herself as an ordinary tourist, and indeed her wealth ensures that she is not. Rather than just visiting places, she actually buys real estate, allowing her to claim ownership of the realities she encounters. One such purchase is the Bahamian Island of Cloud Cay, which comes with a 'small village of a handful of Bahamians who for three generations had cooked, cleaned and waited on the household of the owner of the island' (p. 139). Mattina leaves after a visit of several months, her happiness at having made friends with the islanders only slightly marred by her recognition of the terms of that friendship. She reasons:

> What else but dollars could she have given the island people? They gave her much knowledge of themselves, their stories, their myths and legends... their families, their hopes. And as the plane left Nassau, looking over Cloud Cay, Mattina thought, with a furious sense of possession, I *know* them, I *know* them. They are my friends (p. 140).

Mattina's unwillingness, here, to acknowledge the economic basis of what she wishes to see as a purely intellectual and emotional exchange is one example of the kind of systematic denial John Frow argues underlies the practice of tourism. He suggests that 'Touristic shame and the apposition of an authentic to an unauthentic gaze work to repress an understanding of the investments (both financial and moral) that the circulation of cultural capital makes possible'.[4] Thus, essential to Mattina's denial is her repeated insistence on the authenticity and integrity of her experience as against that of other tourists. As she gets off the plane in New York, she is momentarily disturbed by the memory of an occasion on which, washing her hair in the lagoon with laundry detergent, she saw some dead fish floating by the shore. Sam, the boatman told her 'They've been poisoned... Probably some tourist with detergent' (p. 140). Mattina's immediate reaction had been defensive '"I *always* wash my hair with detergent," she

told herself. "It's completely *harmless*. These people will make a song and dance about everything"' (p. 140). Later, she contemplates the possibility that she may have poisoned them, but reasons 'It's *my* island... I bought it, paid for it. The fish were most likely ill to begin with' (p. 141). This rationalization exposes the contradictions in Mattina's construction of her activity, as she attempts to disavow both her status as a tourist – she owns the island – and her responsibility – this situation arose before she got there. Once again, her behaviour is consistent with the practices of tourism. As Frow argues,

> It is tourism itself that destroys (in the very process by which it constructs) the authenticity of the tourist object; and every tourist thus at some level denies belonging to the class of tourist. Hence a certain fantasized dissociation from the others, from the rituals of tourism, is built into almost every discourse and almost every practice of tourism (p. 146).

For Mattina, the process of dissociation is complete as she leaves American customs: 'Her unease like a mild indigestion passed quickly, and there were Jake and John Henry [her husband and son] waiting, so near and loving that Mattina burst into tears. "I'm not flying away again," she said. "Not ever"' (p. 141). As usual, she finds that the memory of her travelling experience and the stories she tells, renew her love for Jake and help consolidate their relationship.

For Mattina, then, the real value of her travelling experience lies in its confirmation of her identity at home. She thus exemplifies Dean MacCannell's argument in *The Tourist*, that for the traveller, foreign cultural experience serves as a means of authenticating membership in a particular social group. As MacCannell points out, the tourist's voyage is ultimately circular in that the beginning and the end, between which everything can be 'domesticated', are the same place – home.[5] This idea may function on more than one level, as is illustrated by Mattina's subsequent visit to Cloud Cay accompanied by her family and friends with young children. Not yet adept in the process of imaginative assimilation required to feel 'at home' in a strange place, the children are uncomfortable on the island:

> when the parents explained that Cloud Cay was a *real* tropical island with coconuts and palm trees and sharks and scorpions, where they could play at being shipwrecked and captured by pirates and live in caves with wild animals for pets, young Eugenia began to howl so much with fright and homesickness that the parents assured the children that Cloud Cay was just like home, not at all like one of those islands in books or on television (p. 144).

Interestingly, the adults' first attempt to 'sell' the concept of the island to the children places it in the realm of hyperreality; the island is *real*, just like on TV. Alterity, then, exists only in the realm of the imagination as

controlled by the authority of the television, or of the American books they take with them to the island – *Treasure Island* and *Moby Dick* (p. 143). The disturbing unfamiliarity of the island can thus be explained away by its failure to conform to the 'authentic' exotic islands of American fiction.

While this explanation satisfies the children, Mattina has a bit more trouble with it, when, during her trip to New Zealand, neither Maori nor Pakeha culture seems to reflect the kind of definitive New Zealand reality she expected to find. One of her greatest disillusionments follows her meeting with some Maoris, from whom she had expected to glean the 'truth' of the legend of the Memory Flower for which Puamahara is famous. When she explains her interest in the legend to Hena Hanuere, adding 'I guess you know it in the Maori language,' Hena responds with embarrassment 'I get by with English.... It's the younger generation that are speaking Maori. I'm learning, you know, it's not so easy when you've been brought up Pakeha...' (p. 26). When Mattina leaves the store, Hena calls 'Arrivederci', 'the universal television goodbye,' Mattina notes, 'supplanting all other languages' (p. 26). Thus establishing herself as a member of television culture, Hena violates Mattina's image of the spiritual purity of Maoritanga. As Frow points out,

> The otherness of traditional or exotic cultures has to do with their having escaped the contamination of this fallen world: having escaped the condition of *information* (in Benjamin's sense), being unaware of their own relativity, avoiding absorption into the embrace of touristic self-consciousness (p. 130).

Hena refuses to conform to this image, and speculates on the source of Mattina's curiosity: 'the novelty, I suppose. The tribes of the far south on that TV program *The Beautiful World*, eh?' (p. 84). Not only does Hena dispel the myth of Maori innocence, but also, and more disturbingly, by establishing herself as a viewing subject of rather than simply an object on television, she threatens to overturn the rules of the relationship whereby Mattina is the observer, the controlling eye/I and the Maori the object of her gaze.

Underlying this relationship is an economic system in which the Maoris – and New Zealand as a whole – serve as a commodities for the American consumer. Mattina is thus disturbed to note the extent to which Maori and Pakeha culture alike are entrenched in capitalism. As Ruth Brown has observed,

> elision of the Maori from effective capitalist operation is a part of the Westerner's version of Maoritanga, which foregrounds spiritual inviolability while ignoring or underplaying Maori involvement in entrepreneurial enterprises, so paving the way for continuing colonialist domination.[6]

For Mattina, who had a vision of Maoris and Pakehas embracing a kind of collective pre-capitalist Maoritanga, the materialism of Puamahara is

profoundly disturbing – not the less so because it is quite unabashedly modelled on that of the US. Showing Mattina around his computer shop, Ed Shannon remarks 'I suppose you see plenty of this in New York?' (p. 47). Later, at the Shannons' home, the family computer is proudly unveiled for Mattina to see. She comments:

> 'I should have thought that here in Puamahara you'd not be bothered with such things.'
>
> 'We're not backward by any means,' Ed said sharply...
>
> 'I meant,' Mattina said carefully, 'Puamahara is such a paradise, in a way... that computers seem out of place.'
>
> Renée did not voice her thought 'There they are again, the Americans trying to decide what we should and shouldn't have. Even if Puamahara is a paradise, why should we be deprived? I suppose they think we'd be happy lolling around in the sun all year.'
>
> Instead, Renée said 'We like to keep up, you know. We might have lovely scenery, but that doesn't make us less intelligent.'
>
> Mattina said quickly 'I felt computers might spoil your atmosphere.'
>
> For the tourists, no doubt, Renée thought.
>
> She said, 'We're so far away here,' without entering into the everlasting argument of far away from what, from whom, which distant people and places? (p. 59)

Mattina is irritated by the tendency, exhibited by Renée and others to define themselves in relation to elsewhere – particularly the United States, and is uneasy at the eagerness with which they greet her claim to be a researcher. Hercus Millow's reaction is typical:

> 'Oh, you're writing a book about us, about Puamahara?'
>
> 'Surely,' Mattina said, trapped. 'Not really.'
>
> 'You're a writer?'
>
> Why not, Mattina thought, if that will satisfy them.
>
> 'More or less'
>
> 'You're writing about us, then?'
>
> He laughed aloud, then said, 'I could tell you a few things about Puamahara and Kowhai Street. I wouldn't mind being in a book.' (p. 40)

While the willingness of her subjects to provide information makes Mattina's 'research' easier, it also causes her to doubt the validity of the material she is collecting; she 'wonders if her questioning might destroy the answer. 'Who are you really? What do you think and feel and remember in this town of the Memory Flower?' (p. 70). The self-consciousness of her subjects, and their willingness to provide the kind of information they think Mattina wants, immediately renders that information unauthentic.

The legend of the Memory Flower itself is, perhaps, the most confounding element of all in Mattina's search for authenticity. In the legend, a young Maori woman, chosen by the gods as the collector of the memory of her land, searched the country until, finally, tasting the fruit of a

particular tree she released the power of the past. For many years she assumed the role of storyteller until, one day, she vanished. In her place a tree grew, with one blossom which came to be named the Memory Flower. It was thought that the orchards on the outskirts of Puamahara bore some relation to the original tree, a fact acknowledged, with varying degrees of disinterest, by the residents of Puamahara, who, like Mattina, learned about it from the Tourist Bureau. Attempting to resacralize the story, Mattina explains to the Shannons, 'Puamahara could be the place for pilgrims (I guess I'm a pilgrim) to be healed of their separation from the Memory Flower' (p. 61).

By placing her putatively sociological quest in this context, Mattina acknowledges its roots in nostalgia. Originally defined in terms of the physical symptoms of homesickness (which were probably indistinguishable from seasickness), nostalgia later came to be associated with melancholia, the 'specific depression of intellectuals'.[7] In this particular case, the word retains its contemporary meaning as it reverts to its original sense: suffering from increasingly frequent bouts of nausea, Mattina eventually learns that she is dying of a malignant tumour. Her quest thus takes on an added urgency, even as her illness comes to be seen, increasingly, as an excuse for its inevitable failure. Mattina decides ultimately that her journey is:

> an attempt... to cancel distance between nations... and although she assured herself her study was based on love, or a kind of love, it was also obsessive, with herself a stranger among strangers... trying to break the distance between herself and 'the others', and not, as she expressed it to the residents, 'between neighbour and neighbour'. She had therefore created herself as the dreamed-of centre of the circle, and when from time to time she sensed this, she excused her error, if it was an error, by reminding herself of the physical illness at work within her. (p. 78)

Mattina attempts to retain her own physical substantiality by jealously guarding her authority to tell her own story. She reasons, 'At least I'm not at risk of losing substance. For the moment, I'm the observer, the holder of the point of view' (p. 76). This attempt at control fails, as point of view is wrested from her by Dinny Wheatstone, resident of Kowhai Street and self-titled 'imposter novelist'. On the second day of Mattina's visit, Dinny, knowing that Mattina is the reader for a publishing house, gives her a manuscript to read which contains, as characters, all the residents of Kowhai Street, including Mattina herself. Dinny explains:

> I have seized control of all points of view, although Mattina Brecon, the character from New York, trying to entice the point of view to herself, became unwilling to surrender it. I shall apportion it as I think fit because... it is my only power, my true self that is no self. I speak now. I 'tell'. Generously I give the point of view to others. It is words that take charge of the telling. (p. 52)

Mattina emerges from the manuscript with a sense of unreality, exacerbated by the realization that she has failed to be accepted by the Puamaharanians, and the accompanying, uneasy recognition that 'it is I, not they, who is the creature studied for *Our Beautiful World* shown in prime time' (p. 93). Thus Mattina, as researcher and holder of point of view, has been reduced, to a tourist in New Zealand, and, even more devastatingly, to a character in Dinny Wheatstone's manuscript. Dinny describes Mattina's position in that manuscript:

> I, Dinny Wheatstone, imposter novelist intent on manipulating points of view, choose from daily life the commonplace facts of weather, accidents, quarrels, deaths, losses, gains, delights. Mattina Brecon is now experiencing the commonly haphazard daily life which she has little power to change or manipulate. She is reading my typescript. She has hoped that within two months she might witness and feel a concentration of life that would reveal the secrets of Kowhai Street, the presence of the Memory Flower and its blossoming. (p. 95)

The reader, too, would perhaps wish for such a revelation of secrets, but Dinny Wheatstone – and Janet Frame – ultimately frustrate that desire. The reality which Mattina has attempted to transcribe is finally reduced to a collection of words with no substance – as are all the residents of Kowhai Street. Just before her departure from Puamahara, Mattina wakes up in the middle of the night to find letters of the alphabets of all languages, written and spoken, falling from the sky. In the morning, a van stops at each house on Kowhai Street and removes the inhabitants, none of whom is heard of again. Mattina returns to New York with relief at having forestalled her own disappearance and retained her point of view; 'now in a governed world of warmth and money and reason, foreignness forgotten – who cared, anyway, about the people of other lands...?' (p. 159). Later, however, as she is dying, Mattina becomes obsessed by the loss of the people from Kowhai Street and, unable to clearly articulate the significance of her experience, she urges her husband, Jake and her son, John Henry to visit Puamahara to preserve its memory. The final ebbing away of her point of view would seem to attest to the power of Dinny Wheatstone's self-effacing – and perhaps post-colonial – authority. The real author, Janet Frame, has, however, added one final twist: when, before leaving Puamahara, Mattina returned Dinny's manuscript to her, she rejected it on behalf of her New York publishing firm on the grounds that it did not have 'general appeal.' The manuscript – the whole novel, in fact – appears under the authorship of John Henry Brecon, Mattina's son, who, he informs the reader in a teasing final note, visited Puamahara (perhaps) after the death of his mother (who, he then informs us, actually died when he was a young child, so he never knew her). Perhaps, he ventures 'the town of Puamahara, which I in my turn visited, never existed? (p. 196). Just as the Puamaharanians frustrate Mattina's expectations of an authentic New Zealand experience, this final note confounds the post-colonial

critic's desire for a validation of the fictional integrity of Dinny Wheatsone's story. The epiphanic conclusion which is denied Mattina does not have to elude the critic, however, as Suzette Henke demonstrates. Describing the conclusion of Mattina's journey, Henke writes:

> A new music arises from the chorus of the Carpathian voices, a mother tongue ritually released and free to play with explosive iterations that well up from a primitive, instinctual memory obscured by centuries of Anglocentric domination – by the white man's colonial burden and the black man's enforced subservience.[8]

In its attempt to represent *The Carpathians* as a vision of pure post-coloniality, such a conclusion may be seen to reflect the critic's desire for self-consolidation, for the authority derived from the production of a perfect literary artefact. Like the tourist's, the theorist's social identity is confirmed less through the endeavour itself than from the souvenirs and stories she comes home with. At the same time, the theorist's practice, like that of the tourist, can have an enormous impact – political and economic – on the object of critical inquiry (that the location for this particular gathering of inquiring critics is also a popular tourist destination raises interesting questions that I won't attempt to pursue now).

When Dinny Wheatstone warns Mattina of the catastrophic events that are about to befall Puamahara, Mattina's first reaction is one of denial. She

> tried to think of something or someone to blame for the way her visit to seek the Memory Flower and get to know (and possess) the people had suddenly begun to change not only her world, but the world of all peoples, the world, the politicians say, 'as we know it'. (p. 124)

While few literary critics wield such influence, we nevertheless need to accept responsibility for the effects of our critical practices, on the academy, and on the literary territory we choose to survey. Susan Hawthorne has argued that

> It is precisely because capitalism *depends* on the usefulness of its colonies that the work of [post-colonial] writers just now is doing well. What is the basis of this 'usefulness'? Western capitalism depends on change, or on the illusion of change, to establish a need for (apparently) *new* goods.[9]

Looked at in this context, Canada Council's 'new' need for authenticity is as spurious as Mattina's search for touristic transcendence. As post-colonial critics, we tend to try and distance ourselves from both of these pursuits. At the same time, in our prevailing concern to define the integrity of our critical project, particularly against what are perceived as the less politically pure agendas of post-modernism and post-structuralism, we need to be wary of making the claim that our reading experience is somehow more 'authentic' than theirs.

The Carpathians powerfully demonstrates the emptiness of such claims, as it exposes the imposture of both touristic and critical authority.

NOTES

1. Stephen Godfrey, 'Canada Council Asks Whose Voice Is It Anyway?', *Globe and Mail* 21 March 1992, p. A13.
2. Georges Van Den Abeele, 'Sightseers: The Tourist as Theorist.' Rev. of *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, by Dean MacCannell, *Diacritics* 10 (Dec 1980), p. 9.
3. Janet Frame, *The Carpathians* (London: Pandora, 1989), p. 59. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
4. John Frow, 'Tourism and the Semiotics of Nostalgia', *October* 57 (Summer 1991), p. 149.
5. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, (New York: Shocken, 1976), p. 77.
6. Ruth Brown, 'Maori Spirituality as Pakeha Construct', *Meanjin* 48.2 (1989), p. 257.
7. Bryan Turner, 'A Note on Nostalgia', *Theory, Culture and Society* 4.1 (1987), p. 147.
8. Suzette Hemke, 'The Postmodern Frame: Metalepsis and Discursive Fragmentation in Janet Frame's *The Carpathians*', *Australian and New Zealand Studies in Canada* 5 (Spring 1991), p. 33.
9. Susan Hawthorne, 'The Politics of the Exotic: The Paradox of Cultural Voyeurism', *Meanjin* 48.2 (1989), p. 260.